

BY BRIAN ZAHND

God Is Mons

There are monsters in this world, but the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not one of them.

Yes, Virginia, there are monsters. We have an imagination for monsters because we know of their existence. Venomous and vicious beasts were a daily peril for our earliest ancestors. Volcanoes and tsunamis can swallow whole cities. Hurricanes and tornadoes roar from the heavens, leaving hell in their wake. Epidemics of disease are lethal predators taking their pitiless toll. Worst of all, there are monstrosities

of men—conquerors and warlords, tyrants and despots—galloping across history like ringwraiths bringing conquest, war, famine and death. We can imagine monsters because we have met them.

But the living God is not one of them. Not the God who Jesus called *Abba*.

Oh, the gods are monstrous, of course they are. They are

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mercurial and merciless, petty and vengeful. They have to be mollified by a virgin flung into a volcano or a victim sacrificed on a stone altar. They always demand a violent and bloody appeasement...or else! But we know about these gods now,

we know what they really are. They are personifications of those beasts and disasters and epidemics and wars and tyrants that frighten us so. They are deified projections of our own rage and fear. They are the desperate attempt to deal with our own sin and shame. The good news is that the God revealed in Christ does not belong to the category of Mars and Moloch, of Ares and Zeus. These are the false gods of our frightened and shame-laden imaginations. **The Creator God, the One True God, is not vengeful and retributive like those**

gods of the primitive pantheon. In his triumph Jesus put these petty and vindictive gods out of business. It's only their fading ghosts that haunt us today.

In the dread of night we may be tempted to think that the true God shares the fearsome attributes of the vanquished monster gods. In our horror we imagine how Scripture confirms our nightmares. In our terror we may use the Bible as a pallet to paint a macabre

and monstrous image of God. But then the day dawns and we hear Jesus say, "It is I. Be not afraid" (John 6:20). With the dayspring of Christ the terrors of night fade away. *Jesus is perfect theology.* And Jesus saves us from our primeval

nightmares about the divine. The hands of God are not hurling thunderbolts. The hands of God have scars—they were nailed to a tree as he forgave monstrous evil.

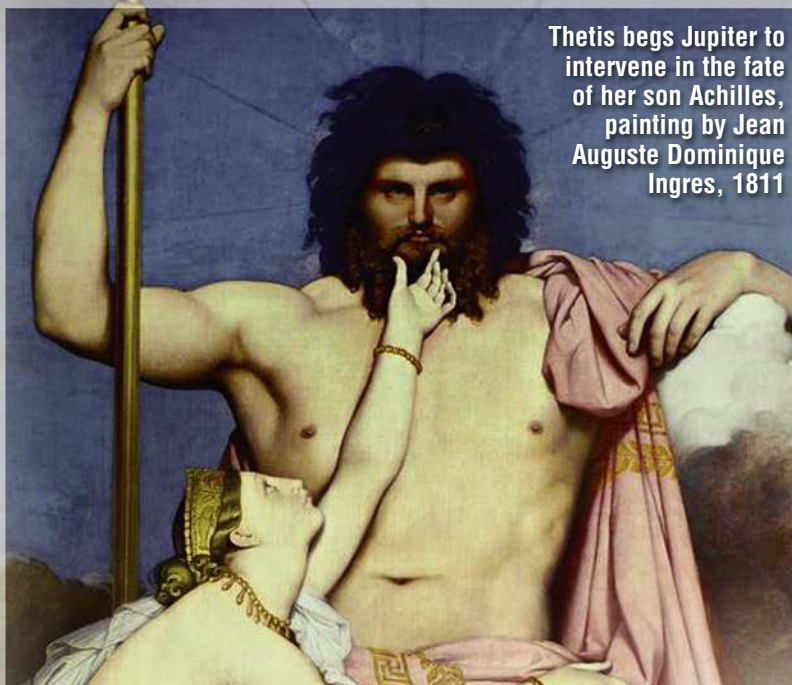
“I no longer fear God, but I love him. For love casts out fear.”—Saint Anthony the Great (251–356)

I agree with Saint Anthony. I am also well aware that some will vehemently protest Saint Anthony’s words and my agreement with them.

Nevertheless, I agree with the great saint because this has been my experience as well. For many of us, a dread fear of God may be the only place we can begin our journey. It’s how we first take God seriously. But it’s only the starting point and we must not stay there. So, yes, I understand the Bible commends the fear of God, and I do too—but only as a preliminary beginning. God desires us to grow beyond the rudimentary beginning of fear.

“God is love. And all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.... Such love has no fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.”—The Apostle John (1 John 4:16–18).

What I fear is not God, but the suffering my sin can inflict on myself and those around me. The malevolent



Thetis begs Jupiter to intervene in the fate of her son Achilles, painting by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, 1811

THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT THE GOD REVEALED IN CHRIST DOES NOT BELONG TO THE CATEGORY OF MARS AND MOLOCH, OF ARES AND ZEUS. THESE ARE THE FALSE GODS OF OUR FRIGHTENED AND SHAME-LADEN IMAGINATIONS.

consequences of sin are very real. But I’m not afraid of God. I used to be, but I am no longer. I am no longer afraid of God because I have come to know God as he is revealed in Christ. I have come to know that God’s single disposition toward me is one of unconditional, unwavering love. The knowledge of God’s love has made it impossible for me to be afraid of God.

You may think such language is reckless. It is not. *The peace of no longer being afraid of God* has been hard won. It has come from relentlessly seeking to know God as he is revealed in Christ. *It is not the result of a liberal, sloppy, pick-and-choose theology.* Rather, it is the result of pushing through the dark outer courts of the fear of God into the holy of holies where the love of God shines

eternally and dispels all darkness. After years of praying, meditating on the Gospels, and sitting with Jesus in contemplation, I am simply no longer afraid of God. Maturing love is driving out fear.

God is not a monster. There are monster god theologies, but they are mistaken.

Accusation and scapegoating, the ravages of war and the wages of sin, these are monsters. The cruel vagaries of chance—until they are tamed by Christ in the age to come—may

fall upon us as monsters.

But God is not a monster. God is love. Jesus reveals this to us. If we move against the grain of love we will suffer the shards of self-inflicted suffering—and we can call this the wrath of God if we like—but the deeper truth remains: **God is love.**

So don’t sit in the dark with the tormenting idea that God somehow harbors malice and ill-will toward you. It’s all a cruel fiction. Turn on the light of Christ and realize that the monster you imagined does not exist. Who exists is Jesus. And he is the one who says to you, “It is I, be not afraid.” □

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